3: Buxton Y-5 (1946-1948)1949 MP5 Amhara MP5

on the sheet, or not far from it, have historical associations. Tegulet, a little to the north, was the home country of Yikuno Amlak, the Shoan prince in whose person the Solomonian line was restored to the throne of Ethiopia in the thirteenth century. Debra Berhan itself, now a rather sordid settlement on the Asmara road, is of ancient foundation, for the emperor Zar'a Yakob made it his capital in the fifteenth century. Although a somewhat cold and inhospitable place it has an obvious advantage as commanding what must always have been an important focus of routes. Even in modern times it was inevitable that the Asmara road should be brought through this easy passage, avoiding the impassable gorges on the one hand and the much broken country of the higher plateau on the other.

Although there is no proof, and apparently no relevant tradition, I should be inclined to attribute to Zar'a Yakob some curious caves excavated in one end of a high hogsback 2 miles south-east of Debra Berhan. Unfortunately I inspected them only once and rather casually and found no opportunity to come again. There are at least two very elaborate excavations, besides some rougher ones, now partly inhabited. The two principal caves are very similar in lay-out. Entering by a roughly rounded lobby, one passes through a small hole in the rock, which admits scarcely any daylight, into the principal interior space. This is approximately circular and perhaps 25 feet in diameter. On the far side, opposite the entrance, it communicates with a smaller chamber semi-circular in form. From the main space a passage leads off, in the first cave to the right, in the second to the left; these receive no daylight at all. In the first cave the passage (which was half under water) turned twice to the right and was thus bent back on itself. It opened into several miniature cells, in shape an erect oval and only big enough for a man to stand in, each of which appeared to have opened through a small hole at the top into an upper space of some kind. The passage belonging to the second cave had basin-shaped excavations in its floor opening through small holes into spaces below. I therefore conjectured that I had here got into an upper passage such as apparently existed above the other system. Possibly these were underground chapels inspired by rock-excavated churches of the Lalibela school. As to the passages and the small spaces leading off them, with what seemed to be their ventilating arrangements, they might have been stores of some kind, or burial chambers, or special places of devotion, or hermits' cells—but these are speculations. If the mud which chokes these caves were removed something definite might be found out about them. They found a use quite recently, for at the time of the Italian invasion *tabots* and other church valuables were said to have been hidden in them.

In the first half of the sixteenth century the Shoan plateau, in common with a large part of Ethiopia, was occupied by Galla tribes invading from the south. These Gallas were essentially horsemen and herdsmen, and it seems that, while they occupied the entire plateau, they did not seriously attempt to penetrate the gorges, into which even a mule descends with difficulty. I believe that the Amhara population became forcibly concentrated in the upper reaches of the gorges at this time, and that the dense population which resulted explains the extraordinary number of churches which came to be built there. Even to-day the greater part of the plateau between Addis

3: Buxton Y-5 (1946-1948)1949 MP5 Amhara MP5

shortly before the Italian invasion of 1935, the first was accomplished peacefully; but not the second. According to the story told me, the *tabot* of the lower Gbiorghis had been borrowed and carried in solemn procession on the plateau in order to ward off a swarm of locusts which were damaging the crops there. This measure was successful, and the plateau people determined to keep the *tabot* which had proved itself so powerful. The people of the gorge would not agree, and tried to recapture their *tabot*. The plateau party however successfully defended it by force of arms, and later built a little church to house it. It was not unusual to attribute specific powers to *tabots*: for instance, that of Dimbaro Mariam (a little east of the north-east corner of the sheet) used to be carried to war by the emperors, attended by a retinue of priests and scribes, to bring success in battle.

The last church to be founded in these parts was the new St. Gabriel, on a prominent hill-top in the district of Dilila near the south-east corner of the sheet. I came upon it when first following the upper course of the Beresaa in December 1946. As I approached the foot of the hill I learnt from passers-by that a new church had been built upon it, and that the foundress herself, a certain great lady from Addis Ababa, was at that moment on the hill. Climbing a rocky track to the top, I saw a cluster of new huts and the still unfinished building of the church. Nearby was a large canvas awning stretched rather clumsily between rough stone walls. Under the awning I found the lady herself, short and stout and genial, sitting on a camp chair; around her, squatting on the ground, was a deferential assembly of local dignitaries, personal retainers and priests. After the fluster caused by my unexpected arrival had died down, I had a talk with the worthy lady who, having just presided at a mid-day meal, now plied me with very welcome refreshment. She had been born and bred in this very place. Having spent most of her life elsewhere, and somehow acquired a certain amount of wealth, she had returned in later life to her place of birth and founded this church only the year before my visit. It met a need, she said, for the area lacked a church, and no other St. Gabriel existed anywhere in the neighbourhood. As it chanced, I had come on the day after St. Gabriel's annual festival (which is the 19th of Tahisas, or, in European style, the 28th of December). She expressed great regret that I had not been present at the festival itself, when big crowds had come from Debra Berhan and from all the surrounding country.

This incident seemed to me interesting as demonstrating the tenacity of the local religious tradition in Ethiopia. After all the upheaval and disruption of Italian occupation and the Second World War, the hold of the ancient Church over the Amhara people seemed unweakened. The Church was able to extend its influence in an area not yet well served as readily as ever. It was still an appropriate act for a pious person to found a new church in a lonely place. Perhaps these things are not surprising, for the Church has been the main support and inspiration of Ethiopian unity since the earliest Christian times. It has always been the focal centre of the national sentiment, the fount of renewed resistance to aggression, the main force, in fact, which has maintained Ethiopia's independence and made of it, as Menelik himself once said, an island of Christianity in the great Islamic sea.